



A BEAUTIFUL ANARCHY

WHEN THE LIFE CREATIVE BECOMES THE LIFE CREATED
SAMPLE CHAPTER

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For Cynthia,
My Beautiful Anarchist.

A BEAUTIFUL ANARCHY

The word “anarchy” literally means, “without a ruler.” In popular use, it’s a political word with heavy baggage, a bloody history, and occasional car bombs. This book is not about that: it’s about freedom.

This is a book about the freedom to create—to live a life of unapologetic, passionate, daring creation—in whatever arena resonates best for you. Parents create when they raise a child, entrepreneurs create when they begin a business, and teachers create when they design a lesson plan. Some people identify with the urge to create more than others, and it’s to them I speak in this book, not because others can’t benefit, but because anyone who persists in the idea that “I’m just not really creative” is unlikely to read this book, believing instead that the die has been cast and they’ve been excluded. They, of all people, need most to read it, and I hope they do.

This book is for people who have a sense of their own urge to create, or those who don’t, but long to look under the hood and find it waiting there. But to its bones, this is a book about art and the process of making it, because what is our life but a chance to make the greatest art of all? Whether you ever set your paintbrush on actual canvas isn’t remote-

ly the point, though I hope you will. What is very much the point is that each of us is given a canvas—from one edge to the other the span of our life—and each of us has a chance to do something brilliant with it. Each of us has the chance to fill that canvas with wild, achingly beautiful swirls of colour, and if you're reading this there's a chance that you feel right now that your canvas is empty, or dotted here and there with hesitant, half-hearted stops and starts, the brush pulled up before you could even gain momentum, for fear of doing it wrong.

As I write this introduction to a now half-written book, the sun is rising in Bali. It's August 2013 and a trailer's just come out for a movie version of one of my favourite short stories, *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty*. Mitty's a dreamer, working as a photo editor at LIFE magazine, allowing daydreams to be a substitute for actually doing what he longs to do. Working at LIFE, but never having one. And then he looks at a photograph of a photojournalist in a refugee camp (played by Sean Penn), and the photograph comes to life long enough for Penn's character to gesture an invitation to Mitty. Come. Stop observing. Stop abdicating your life. Live a great story instead of just watching, telling, or dreaming them.

I'm self conscious about saying it, but I want to be that man; I want to be someone, among many, I hope, who calls to the dreamer and says, "Wake up." I want to invite

others to begin living now, not later, and to ask them with a straight face to step out of their comfort zones and face the fear. I want to see every person in my life doing what they long to do, free from the things that hold them back. Life is not in the dreaming, but in the doing. Don't you dare get to the end of your life, your canvas clean and unmarked. There is no prize for the one who leaves his canvas clean, his scribbled signature in the corner the only thing to differentiate his own off-white rectangle of a life from all the million others who—too paralyzed by fear—have done the same.

My massage therapist once told me the stars were aligning auspiciously. She told me it was a good time to dream big dreams. Not one with a particular reverence for the opinions of the stars, I told her I dream big dreams every day; it's up to the universe to keep up. I wasn't being sarcastic, and she knew it. I also wasn't being cocky. I was just being honest. I do believe in dreams; the bigger the better. But I also believe in action. I believe in great ideas, too, but I don't believe coming up with great ideas is the same as being creative. Being creative is about creating. It's about doing. And so too is living, because life is an act of creation. Day by day, whatever else we make, our first act of creation is our own lives. We must first make the artist before we make the art. Out of nothing nothing comes.

This book is a call to colour outside the lines, in both art and life. It is a book about living free from the rule of everything that holds us back from being the human we were created to become. It is about living free of the rule, or tyranny, of fear and shame, of debt and obligation, and every “should” or “should not” that we have not willingly signed off on. Your art, the thing that stirs from your heart, mind, and soul, the thing that moves you (and hopefully, others), is a free agent, and the moment you begin to ask “What *should* I do? or, “How *should* I do this?” you allow you art to teeter, to lean towards conformity and away from authentic expression.

To do what we *should* in art is bondage. To tell others, with our art, what they *should* think or feel or do, is propaganda. And to tell other artists how they *should* do their art, whether that’s visual art, the written word, or creating a business, is presumptuous, and unkind, and tells the muse we’ve learned nothing at all under her influence.

All very well for the artist, but what of the rest of the world, those working a regular job, whatever that means? I think it all applies equally, if not differently, and that there is room there (there *must* be room) to live our lives increasingly on our terms, as engaged and intentional as possible, as creatively as possible, with the freedom to follow the muse, or our own curiosity, down the road that’s

unique to us. I think almost any endeavour undertaken on those terms can be art.

I'm a photographer and author, a publisher and former comedian. I've made a living from my own creativity since I worked my way through college as a comedian, and while making a living in the arts in no way means my art is *good*, per se, it does mean I've relied on it a little more than I might have otherwise and I think that dependence on my muse has made us more familiar than I might have been otherwise. To write that my muse and I are familiar, however, is to understate what's happened between us. My muse and I have worked closely together over the last twenty years, and the uneasy relationship has become less turbulent over time. And while I'm never quite sure how she feels about me, I think it's fair—if not overly anthropomorphic and unnecessarily romantic—to say I've fallen in love with her, and the life my creativity has made possible.

There is nothing I would rather do than work creatively and, in so doing, to make a living. Whether making a business, making a photograph, or writing a book, the urge to create has always been central to who I am. I believe it is central to who we all are, which is one of the reasons I get twitchy when I hear someone tell me they “aren't really creative.” We're *all* creative, but we've allowed the arts to co-opt that word while making every other area of human

creativity feel a little too self-conscious about using it. And I think we've misunderstood the creative process, which if it's anything at all is messy, each successful endeavour hard-won, each masterpiece the result of a hundred failed sketches and many tears.

It's the fundamental creative urge within us that makes otherwise rational people take complete leave of our senses and have children. It's that same urge that compels people to build houses, find cures for diseases, build companies and products, solve complicated mathematical problems, or write music. The same creative urge that compelled the first cave man to draw animals on cave walls is the same urge that compelled him to carve obsidian into arrow-heads and hunt those same animals for food and clothing. It is that impulse within us to follow the whispers of our curiosity, or the urgency of our needs, around dark corners and into the unknown, that is responsible for every astonishing advancement in our history - the discovery of fire, the law of gravity, the revolution of the earth around the sun, the evolution of the species, or the creation of Michelangelo's *David*, Picasso's *Guernica*, or Handel's *Messiah*.

For every advancement that has taken place, every creation of some new beauty in some new field, that advancement has taken place as a movement from the known and accepted into the unknown and, at times,

unaccepted - to the point of outright rejection. Galileo was declared a heretic for his idea that the earth revolved around the sun and not the other way around. Darwin's never been popular with the same crowd, either. Picasso's cubism was revolutionary and took several years to overcome initial negative reception, even from fellow artists, people who should know better than to hang on so tightly to convention.

Of course, public reaction, either negative or positive, is not the point. The point is that the long history of creativity—in every imaginable field—takes us inevitably, into places where we have to pour new wine into new wineskins, and that invites criticism, which in turn invites fear and soon we're back to hiding in the shadows, letting others take the risk while we abdicate the responsibility to do the one great thing we can do with our lives—be fully ourselves and make art of our lives.

This book is an invitation to celebrate the life creative, and in so doing to embrace its essential and beautiful anarchy. I use the word “anarchy” metaphorically rather than politically, as a call to live our lives on our own terms, which is the only way we can fully be ourselves. It's a call to live our lives free from the bondage of should and ought to: the only way to be truly alive. We need more of these kinds of anarchists, more people who understand the

extraordinary beauty and brevity of life, and who daily find the courage to follow that voice that calls them to something more, even when they don't know what that *something more* is. Even when that voice calls them to places beyond the points that other voices say they should turn back.

What we do not need is anarchy for anarchy's sake. I value this thin metaphor of anarchy because I think, as a metaphor, it represents a beautiful way of life, and of thinking about the creative process and our lives-as-art. When I chose to use this metaphor I did so because it works for me. This beautiful anarchy is not about freedom from law, nor my own desire to live with, or without, certain rules. But where I embrace rules, they are rules I have myself signed off on because they resonate with me, they make the world a better place and are, I hope, descriptive of my life, not prescriptive. I've chosen to live by the rule of love, kindness, and respect—towards others and myself. I believe in forgiveness and grace and, so far as it aligns with my conscience, the law of the land. I pay my taxes. I believe in being a responsible citizen. In fact I believe the life this metaphor describes makes me a better global citizen, and a better human being. If the metaphor fails for you, then find one that works, so long as it leads you to the freedom and joy of creation, and of doing so in the most authentic way possible.

Whatever metaphor you choose, I hope this book gives you the courage to begin filling your canvas again, and if you reach down for the brush only to find it hardened from lack of use, then throw it away and plunge your hands into the paint. However you have to do it, don't leave your canvas blank. Don't deprive your soul, and the people around you, of the chance to see you fill every inch of that canvas—messy and wildly human as it might be—with every flaming colour.

LIFE IS SHORT

That life is short is so blindingly obvious to most of us that it's become cliché. I'm not sure where the line between truth and cliché is, but it's thin. And I'm not sure that we can be free of the truth of things, or free from the chance to act on them, merely by calling them cliché. Sometimes I wonder if we call things cliché in order to excuse ourselves from thinking about them.

Our days are numbered, folks. Not only are they limited, we have no idea exactly how many days remain in the storehouse. Our time here is not merely a resource to be managed. It is *all* we have, and it's insanely beautiful at times, but it's *short*.

One of the gifts of photography is the way it makes us conscious of time. Time is one of our raw materials. Our exposures are measured, in part, in fractions of a second. Sometimes so fast the shutter is closed before you know it's open. The best photographs also rely on the strength, beauty, and universality of a particular *moment*. Blink and it's gone, but when photographed it remains, frozen in space and time, to consider for as long as the print remains. Photography helps those who are willing to see

the moments we'd otherwise miss. And moments are important because the way we live our moments is the way we live our days, our lives. Photographs—the best of them, at any rate—honour the moments, and they speak to us because we know how limited these moments are. Time is limited and we've no idea how much of it we have, so the sooner we cherish, and redeem it, the better.

Time is not money. If time were money we could borrow it. We could steal it. We could bank it and see our days compounded. We can't. We can live it. We can use it to do the thing we are here for, or we can waste it. But we can do little else with it because it's not ours to control. It's given to us in unspecified measure to wring what we can from it.

I am strongly motivated by the brevity of life, not because I fear its end, (though like Woody Allen, I'd rather achieve immortality by not dying than through my work), but because, simply, it will end. What I control is how deeply I live my days, not how long. But I think somewhere along the way the urge to live deeply gets subverted.

We settle. We find a path of lesser resistance and we take the deal, because it's easier to be safe. It's easier to fit in. We'd rather tiptoe through life and make it safely through, because we seem to have willingly forgotten that there's no reward in making it unscathed to our funeral.

Why we take the deal in the first place is another discussion to be had later, because it's got a lot to do with fear and the voices we listen to, but it's important to realize we've settled. There's not a week goes by that someone doesn't tell me they envy my life (and by that they usually mean the good bits, the public bits of my story; few have told me they desperately want to take the path I've taken to get here) and that they wish they could do what I do. And I get it. I really do. But what they seem to mean is that they want what I have without paying the price I've paid to get here. I know people want to change the world and create great art and live the dream and so on. So do I. But some want to do so without giving up what is demanded, by life, in exchange. Were life longer I might have time to do it all, but I don't, and so I make choices: do I do this, or do I do that? Seldom am I given a choice to do both. I don't own a home. My freedom from mortgage payments and maintenance issues frees me to travel. Some can do both. I can't. I've made a choice. I'd rather have a plane ticket to Bali than a big screen television. But to the one who sees no choice but to keep up with their neighbors, the television comes first and the plane ticket remains a dream. For me, if owning the latest car or appliance means I give up the experience of travel, and the freedom to do my work, it comes at too high a cost. Most of us love the idea of having a choice until we're told that choice means giving up one to have another. Some don't realize it is a choice.

Life will go by so fast it'll make our aged heads spin when we get to the end. But it's not only short, it's uncertain. When I graduated from high school we were already talking about careers and what we'd do when we retired. Not once did we say, "*If* we retire"—we treated it as a given. We would retire and in health enough to enjoy the dreams we'd set aside for that retirement. But life has this way of getting in the way of deferred dreams. Leukemia arrives uninvited. A headache becomes a brain tumour that becomes a fight against a possibility we never imagined until it's clear the dreams we saved for later will never happen. I don't mean to be morbid but we live, many of us, in a culture that lives in perpetual denial of the inevitable, and it's costing us our dreams. You can't bank your time. The time, as it has always been, is only now.

That my days are numbered forces me to choose carefully how I spend them. And because my life—even if I live to 120—will seem so heartbreakingly short, I will choose not only *what* I do with my life, but *how* I do it.

I know. It sounds so selfish. We've been taught to keep our heads down. We've been taught not to be selfish. Many of us are also taught to respect the choices of others, and to give them the dignity of living their lives on their own terms. We're taught to extend forgiveness, to be kind. We're taught to love others as we love ourselves. But the moment

we try to love ourselves the way we're taught to love others we're chastised: "Don't be so selfish."

And yes, sometimes they're right. But often they aren't, and the admonition against selfishness has become a perverse reversal of things. The most loving people I know find that love *first* within themselves. It is the self-loathing who abhor others. It's the ones who won't respect themselves that don't respect others. It is the ones who don't allow themselves to risk and dream and live extraordinary, unconventional lives who discourage others from the same.

At the risk of being misunderstood, I think it's time we took back a healthy regard for selfishness. In fact, I'll go one better (in for a penny, in for a pound, right?): I think it's time we made ourselves a priority. To do otherwise is to expect a bountiful yield from a garden we've neither planted nor tended. I'm not suggesting we allow ourselves to become egomaniacs, just that we extend the same love and grace to ourselves that we do to others, and to do so *first* so we have a place from which to love and respect others. That we respect ourselves and allow ourselves the same chance to live our dreams as we do to others. Only once we take back the responsibility to make our own choices—to live on our terms—do we have a place for extraordinary generosity, profound kindness, and the acts of heroism of which we're capable, and of which others will one day call *selfless*.

I'm not looking to justify a life of what I would have once called selfishness; I'm looking for a healthy place to put myself in this world. A place to stand. A place from which to love and do what I have been called, by Life, to do. A place to do good, to love boldly and without fear. A place to be generous and hospitable, and to do my art without shame in the days I have allotted to me. A place to become everything I can be, without settling for anything less. A place from which I can find the leverage to make the same things happen in the lives of those I love. Life is too short to do anything else, and too beautiful not to fight hard to be a part of it.

EX NIHILO

There is an old Latin saying that gets thrown around in the theological circles from which I emerged as a young man when I left college: *ex nihilo nihil fit*. Out of nothing, nothing comes. Its use, as far as doctrine goes, is to enforce the idea of a Prime Mover. Nothing comes from nothing, so before there was something, there must have been Something Else to create the something. Or something like that. The years have taken most of the details from the dogma of which I was once fond, and smoothed my edges a little. But the idea remains sound, at least as a metaphor.

I'm listening to Miles Davis' *Kind of Blue* album right now, the cover of which was shot by photographer Jay Maisel. That's neither here nor there, but the following story is. As the story goes, a student approached Jay and asked him, "How do I make more interesting photographs?" Without pausing, Jay replied, "Become a more interesting person." Indeed.

We are the source of our own creations, whether that's a story, a child, a photograph, or a business. That work of art, if it's to be art at all (and I think all of those can be),

will reflect the artist in some fashion. So then the act of creation that is our first concern is ourselves. Before we create art, we must create the artist. I think it's fair to talk in these terms, forgetting for a moment that on the surface it sounds profoundly narcissistic, because I don't believe we're just passive victims of fate. Yes, life happens to us in ways we never expected, and luck, or serendipity, has a way about it that's hard not to see as wondrous and mysterious (as well as cruel and malign) much of the time. But we live and create in reaction to these events, and it is those reactions over which we have control.

When the potter is given a lump of clay, he creates something of it—either passively, by doing nothing and letting it harden into a useless block, or actively, by putting it on the wheel and shaping it to his desire. We are what we are, flaws and all—and I'll talk about the power of constraints later—but what we are *not* is powerless. As our history on this planet too well illustrates, the human will is powerful, and the decision to react to what life brings us is either a creative force or a destructive one, in our all-too-short life. It's by virtue of the will to react and make choices—even in the light of some very dark, or paralyzing, circumstances—that we create our own lives.

As a photographer, I am a vocal advocate of a very intentional approach to making photographs. There are a

lot of decisions that affect the final outcome of the image, and I think abdicating those decisions is a lost opportunity to create something that more clearly expresses ourselves. I believe the same about life.

In fact, I believe this so strongly let me try one more metaphor. As a race we've found meaning in stories for millennia. We consume stories at an astonishing rate. What stories we chose to read, watch, or listen to, become a part of us. Sadly, because they do give meaning, I suspect many of these stories have become a substitute for living an interesting life. Stripped of all risk, it's easier to *watch* great stories than to *live* them. But choose to live a great story, and we open ourselves to all the possibilities the human drama has always drawn on. Exciting, heady, stuff to find the love of your life, but it comes with the risk of heartache and loss. Easier, perhaps, to curl up with whatever movie in which Tom Hanks and Meg Ryan's characters are falling in love than to do so ourselves. Amazing to jump on a plane to Africa or Southeast Asia for an adventure, but you risk all the uncertainties that have kept thousands from doing the same thing, safe at home on the couch instead with their Lonely Planet book and BBC travel documentaries.

We have the choice, to actively write a more interesting story, or passively accept the one that comes our way. I'd be contradicting myself to say we *ought* to choose one

over the other. Part of being human is having the dignity to choose. But if our lives are stories then it's the more interesting one that I'd rather both read and write. And it's the person living that more interesting story that is going to create the most interesting, meaningful art with their life. That kind of life happens intentionally. We may not choose the things that happen to us—few of us do—but we control our own reactions and, in that way, shape the clay we've been given.

So much of our raw material lies outside our grasp. None of us controls what is behind us in our past. We don't control the parents to whom we were born, or the place or income bracket in which we grew up. We went to this or that school and by the time we turn 18 we've had a childhood of victories and defeats, joys and sorrows, and enough traumas, either real or imagined, to fuel a future lifetime of angst-ridden dreams or novels, should you decide to pay it forward and inflict those on us. We will, because this is life, continue to collect these experiences. But they are raw materials only, and what we do with them is a part of the choices we make in the creation of ourselves. It's a collaborative effort with Life, an unpredictable partner to be sure, but it's our *reactions* that form the person we become.

To those reactions we add our choices about the stories we listen to, the books we read, the people with whom we

surround ourselves, and the jobs in which we choose to remain too long. We choose the ones to whom we give our hearts, our time, our money. We choose to continue learning or not. We choose to buy that new stereo instead of the ticket to Australia for the year in the outback we always wanted. And in so doing, we create the person we become, piece by piece. It's a good argument for making those decisions with greater care and intention.

If I've got a tendency to oversimplify, forgive me; I know life is profoundly complicated at times. But I also know that "it's complicated" is a poor excuse for resigning ourselves to our fate, as though it's our lot in life. It would be easy to allow overwhelming debt, bankruptcy, divorce, a diabetes diagnosis, or a near-fatal fall that shatters both your feet, to sideline you. Or me. I've lived through all of those, and there have been times I'd have thrown all this right back in the face of anyone who told me excitedly that I was "living a really great story." But they'd be right all the same, and at the end of it, what have we got but to make the best of it, and write the best damn story we can? Self-pity makes an interesting scene in the movie, especially when it leads to broken furniture, a bar fight, or preferably both—but it gets old fast, and after a few minutes it's neither a story we want to keep watching, nor one we want to be a part of. The best stories are never the easy ones.

I keep using the word, *react*, but it's only half the story; living in reaction, even mindful reaction, is not living intentionally. Take your favourite story: the hero usually resists the initial call to adventure, or love. Then something comes along to force him into the fray—he reacts and embarks. But at a certain point the story becomes his own, and it is his desire that drives him forward, not just circumstances. He eventually risks it all because the calling now comes, not from outside voices or forces, but from deep inside. Now might be a good time to start unabashedly asking yourself, “*What do I want?*”

Some of the best stories don't really begin until the hero grapples with that question. And for some of us the grappling will come hard because we've been taught not to ask the question. It seems selfish. But I think the things we do in life that are motivated by desire and love are the most powerful, and I don't believe that our happiness has to come at the expense of others. I believe we're connected and my happiness has to include that of others. I'll talk more about this, but I want to plant the question. The first question is not, “What should I be doing with my life?” It's, “What do I want to do with my life?” And if that sounds selfish to some, I can only say that it's in identifying the deepest desires of my heart or mind that I find my calling. It's my hardwiring, and I believe it was put there by Something or Someone good.

Knowing, deep down, what you want to do with your life leads to a ruthless prioritization of resources. Knowing your time, among other resources, is limited, and knowing what you want to do with that time, allows you a profound freedom, even if that freedom is not always easy.

If you want to create more interesting, meaningful, beautiful songs, paintings, businesses, or meals, become a more interesting, meaningful, and beautiful person. Gather the best raw materials you can (or the only ones you've got), work within the constraints you're handed, and make something new. The art comes from the will of the artist, but first there has to be an artist, and—out of nothing, nothing comes. Reaction only takes us so far: it's more a posture of daily life, one we assume while we go about intentionally pursuing, or creating, the things we most long for.

What do you want to do with your life? I don't mean this abstractly or obliquely. Find some silence and sit down with a cup of coffee. Mindfully consider your life now, the things you've done with your life that have made you the most content or fulfilled. What do you want to be remembered for, one day long in the future when your moments run out? Write it down. What does your heart long for? What dreams can you not let go of? What obstacles stand in the way now? What steps could you take to clear them? If those desires are worth doing, they're worth recognizing and clearing a path for.

WANT MORE?

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